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(SNP067) Mamie Johnson and Betsey Harrell
interviewed by James R. Johnson, transcribed by
Peggy C. Bradley

Mamie Clarice Johnson

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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK

NARRATORS: BETSEY HARRELL
-Bessie Johnson
Mamie Johnson
INTERVIEWER: Mr. James R. Johnson
PLACE:
DATE: February 6, 1966
66

TRANSCRIBED BY:
Peggy C. Bradley
COMPLETED DATE:
August 30, 1984

J.J.: Aunt Mamie and Aunt ^{BETSEY} Bessie, we stopped by today, this snowy day in February. Sunday, February 6th, to talk to you two a little bit about your past. I would like to start off by asking you, Aunt Mamie, to give me your full name and tell me how old you are?

M.J.: Mamie ^{CLARICE} Johnson and I will be 89 years old.

J.J.: And, the other member of the Johnson family that we have is my Aunt ^{BETSEY} Bessie, and we will start off with you by asking you your full name and when you was born?

B.J.: ^{BETSEY} Bessie Jane ^{HARRELL} Harold .

J.J.: Age?

B.J.: Age is 72.

J.J.: Seventy-two? Aunt Mamie, would you tell me, please ... uh, .. how many brothers and sisters you have and name them and give their age, in the order which they were born.

M.J.: I have three sisters, ... half-sisters and four brothers. There are only three brothers a'living at this time. One of them is, Larry B. Johnson ... and he was born

J.J.: Naturally, when we started this, we weren't fully prepared, ... since we have gotten out a family record and now we will fill in a little of the question I just asked Aunt Mamie. Uh, ... her family consisted of four girls and four boys, ... I noticed from the record, in this order: Maude H. Johnson was born, December 14th, ¹⁸⁸⁰ 1818. Mamie C. Johnson was born, May, 11th, 1883. ^{VIRLIE} S. Gore was born, July 9th, 1886. John W. Johnson, born Novemeber 27th, 1888. Harry W. Johnson, born April 7th, 1890. Oscar C. Johnson, born November 10th, 1891, and ^{BETSEY} Bessie J. ^{HARRELL} Harold, born May 1st., 1893. Lawrence E. Johnson, who is my father, born December 31st., 1894.

Now, the parents of these eight people was, ... father:

Henry L. Johnson, born July 3rd, 1858, and his wife was, Mollie E. Shenk, born July 26th, 1857. I notice, also from this record that Henry L. Johnson and Mollie E. Shenk, Aunt Mamie tells me that her mother was know as Mary Elizabeth Shenk, ... and they married on May the 11th, 1880.

Somewhere preceding on this tape, we had established the today's date as being February 6th, 1966. And, of this family of eight children, there are four living today. Uh,... Mamie Johnson, Mrs. ^{BETSEY HARRELL} Bessie Harold, uh, ... Oscar C. Johnson, living in ^{ZANESVILLE} Ohio; and my Father, Lawrence E. Johnson. Now, Aunt Mamie, would like to ask you if you remember anything about your grandparents, and who they were?

M.J.: Yes, ... my Grand..... I don't know my Grandfather, he died before my Father was married. But, my Grandmother lived with us ... for many years, until she died and she was 87 when she died and My Grandmother and Grandfather Shenk died earlier, so I never knew much about them.

J.J.: Well, what was your Grandmother's name?

M.J.: My Grandmother, Florence Johnson, ... and my Grandfather was Henry Johnson.

J.J.: Now, I think we have talked about this family and a few people that ^{ARE} is no longer living uh, ... where was you born?

M.J.: I was born in Rappahannock County at ... In the Park area now. (Laughed)

J.J.: Was that at ^{HULL} ~~Hauss~~ School?

B.J.: No.

M.J.: No, it was up where your Granddaddy use to live up on top of this road.

J.J.: Up on Piney Rock?

M.J.: No, we was not born there.

J.J.: You and Aunt Maude was both born and Granddad died on Piney Rock. Well, when was your home established at ^{HULL} Hausst School?

M.J.: Shortly after I was born. We lived on there before ^{VIRLIE} Vallie was born. She was born up, what you call the Freeplace, just above Cook's place, up on the hill. And, ... up on this ... what's this stream's name? At ^{HULL} Hausst Schoolhouse? The whole family was born near ^{HULL} Hausst Schoolhouse.

J.J.: Let's change the subject just a little bit now, and talk about some of the things that was done, uh, ... in ^{RAPPAHANNOCK} ~~Rockingham~~ County in the events of your home. You were living, I understand, and I have vague recollection that my Grandfather, ... uh ... Henry L. Johnson, was a cabinet maker, and also repaired harness, and I think of interest in the fact, that he made coffins for various people throughout the community, and I believe, made the coffin he was buried in. Uh, ... I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about the process of coffin making and did you ever have any part of it?

M.J.: Yes. ... I use to ... He had a shop right below our house and where he worked in. And, I use to go down and help him line the coffins, and when he made them. And, then before he died, he said he should had made his own coffin, but he had already gotten part of the lumber for it, but he said he should had made it and he was real anxious to be buried in a coffin, he didn't want a casket. And, he asked me to go down and see Miss Hitt, at Sperryville, and ask

her if she would have it made. But, she didn't, but she
I promised him I would see to it and I asked my ^{OLDEST} ~~older~~ brother
to see to it that he got one, and he did. ... He was buried
in a coffin, but it wasn't one he made.

J.J.: What would be the different between a coffin and a casket
as we know it today?

M.J.: A coffin is fitted more to the person, it is wide through
the shoulder and then tapered off down to the feet. It was
more of a shape of a person.

J.J.: I think I've heard, I might be wrong again as I was when
I was thinking Granddad was buried in the coffin that he
made. ... I ... I .. do well to remember that he was buried
in a coffin, and I thought he was buried in one that he
made. I am glad to set the record streight on that. Uh, ...
but, ... in my conversations somewhere ... I've understand
that when a person in the community died, that when they
came up the road that you could probably tell if someone
in the family died by the type of stick they carried.

M.J.: They carried a stick in their hand and when you saw them
ride up on a horse, why, you knew just what their business
was.

J.J.: Well, how from that stick could you tell their business?

M.J.: Well, you could ... It was, you know, just an ordinary
stick, but you knew it was The way they carried it,
for one thing ... you could tell what it was.

B.J.: They had it laying across their lap.

J.J.: In fact that it was a certain length and notched at a certain
point on the stick. Did that have anything to do with it?

M.J.: I don't know about that.

J.J.: Is it true, the way I understand it, the length of the stick represented the length of the person that they had to ...

B.J.: Yea.

J.J.: ... be buried in that coffin and the width of the notch was the widest part of that person?

M.J.: Yea. I guess that was right, yes. The He use to open the coffins at the grave side. He'd always open the cas-... coffins up, ... and the last one that he ... Well, I think it was the last one he ever made, was Benny Long's wife, and she died ... And, when he ... went to open her up, he fainted. ... He just ... it was the last, ... He couldn't stand it. She was in awful condition and ... he, ... I don't think he ever made another one after that. The cabinet maker.

J.J.: To change the subject again, ... uh, ... to ... uh, ... to what the women folks around the house did. And, ... uh, ... I would like to talk a little bit about weaving and uh, .. and fancy work of that type. Uh, ... do you know weather there was a loom in the Johnson family?

M.J.: My Grandmother Johnson had one. I don't know what happened to it. ... I don't know. But, she use to weave.

B.J.: Weave rugs, ... that what they was, you know, in the rugs?

J.J.: Could you tell me a little bit how a loom was set up or anything about the process of weaving a rug?

M.J.: Well, I really didn't see my Grandmother doing it very much, but I was down to Mrs. Hitt's one day when she was looming, when I went down there to see about Daddy's coffin. And, she ... it was just like a ... table she had. Of couse, she had this yarn or stuff, and she just seem to ...

be weaving along, you know, ... uh, ... for a rug. Best, I can remember about it.

B.J.: I remember I was out in the backyard cracking walnuts and she mashed her thumb, and she fainted. I can see her all now. And, my Daddy said, "Well, it maybe a good thing, maybe it'll teach these ladies how to sew." So, I came in and finished that suit. (Laughed) And, I been sewing every since.

J.J.: This is a suit that your mother made for the family?

B.J.: For one of the boys, yea. ... You made the boys suits ... every winter. She made ... when she was living. And, she mashed her finger and that's what he said. So, I took it over from there. Well, until she got better, of course.

J.J.: Do you ever recall any flax being ?

M.J.: No, I don't. I don't ever remember seeing any.

J.J.: Did you ever see any wool carded?

M.J.: Oh, yea. Oh, carded?

J.J.: Uhhuh.

M.J.: No, I don't know if I ever seen any wool carded. No, I've seen them sheared the sheep, ... and I've seen it while it was in that condition but I never saw it carded.

J.J.: You ever seen anyone spinning wool on

M.J.: No.

J.J.: ... a spinning wheel?

M.J.: No.

J.J.: Did you Aunt ^{BETSEY} Bessie?

B.J.: I remember seeing my Mother card wool, but I don't remember seeing anybody spinnint it ... on the wheel.

J.J.: What was the process of dying material? Uh, do you recall getting any of the mountain herbs, or bark, or hulls, or anything of that type to dye material with?

B.J.: My Mother use to dye with Black Walnut hulls. Dye made out of Black Walnuts. (Laughed)

J.J.: Aunt Mamie, what I would like to do now is ... uh, ... ask you a question. ... Uh, ... to briefly trace your life, as you remember it ... uh, ... from the time you was a small girl, ... uh, ... if you remember your life at all on Piney River, and from there to ^{HULL} Hauss' School. ... And, I understand that you taught school for awhile ... and had square dancing in the holler here, and now we are back in the same community. Could you briefly do that?

M.J.: When I was about twenty years old, my Father sent me to Sperryville to school one winter and I was the only one he teached to. And, I went to Sperryville and I ... went to Sperryville one winter and went to school to Mr. Ned Johnson, unto

B.J.: Ned Johnson?

M.J.: And, ... she was a Wood, she was. She was a Wood. Mrs. Annie Wood, use to taught at the ^{HULL} Hauss Schoolhouse for eighteen years, and I went to school to her. And, then after that I took the examination and taught for six years. And, a cousin of mine, Elizabeth Hutton, was also teaching here at Sycamore School. And, she wanted to go to Lynchburg and take a business course and she wanted me to go with her. And, I went with her, I stopped teaching and went with her. And, when we got there, we hadn't paid our tuition yet, but we spent the night and she got homesick,

begin to cry and said she didn't want to stay. So, I come back with her. So, we come back with her and she taught in Fairfax County and I stayed in Washington and and went to school and took some of the high studies that winter. And, ~~Well~~ Well, before I went down there, I taught at ^{HULL} Hauss' School, I mean Sycamore, too. I taught at ^{HULL} Hauss' Schoolhouse three years, I think, and down at Sycamore three years. And, then ... I went to work in Washington, I worked there ... went ... I was married there, which didn't last, ... it lasted five years. And, I went to Baltimore for awhile. And, when my Mother ^{DIED} ... I came home to help wait on her when she was sick. And, after I went back, ... I got a position with Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, ... Bethesda, Maryland. They were, ... Mrs. Andrews, was a .. one of the DuPont family in ^{WILMINGTON} Bloomington, Delaware. And, I lived with them for ten years and did ... my job was called, kind of a Mother's helper. And, I didn't have anything special to do. I just ... worked. ... We spent one winter in Georgia, we spent two winters in South Carolina, we'd spend most of our summers in or near Orange, Virginia. In 1930, I moved back up here, closer to where I was raised and I been living there every since. And, I had my own home, had my brother build my house. My brother, ^{LAWRENCE} Johnson, built my house. Sold me the property that it was on. And, a year ago I don't know what to say now, I don't know how I said it.

J.J.: We had some difficulty with the tape, and the ... You wound up that that you was living at a certain time. Now, Aunt ^{BETSEY} Bessie, ... Aunt Mamie told us about her life from about twenty years old. I would like for you to tell us a little

bit about you early life.

B.J.: Well, I was born and raised close to ^{HULL} Hauss' Schoolhouse. All the schooling I got was at ^{HULL} Hauss' School. ... I went as far as the eighth grade. And, I stayed home and milked cows, and helped, with the work to do around the place, such as; drying apples, cracking walnuts, and feeding ^{PIGS}, chickens, and so forth. ... And, when I was twenty-five years old, I married. I moved down the road about two miles, we built our little home, ... and lived there for, until the Park come along. The Park didn't take our home ... but, it taken my Mother-in-law's home, so we let her have ours and I moved to Sycamore, ... and I'm still living there. And, in my young life, I ... had school and different jobs, but I never had a chance to do any traveling, but I had good times with my friends and neighbors. We use to go in the fall of the year, we'd dry apples, and ... and ... gather up walnuts and crack those and ... do different things. And, kin folks and all, would get together and go for apple butter boilings and ... In winter time we had dances in the community, we had big times. Everybody worked and helped one another and come to making apple butter, to come in help one another to peel apples and help at hog killing time and men would come in and help cut the meat up. So, ... of ... at that time in my young days, there was plenty of chestnuts trees around, and we picked up chestnuts and sold them. And, sold the ... some of the dried apples. We got five cents a pound for the chestnuts and also for the apples. That was all the spending money we had. (Laughed) And, things were very different then from

what they are now, but in a way, ... uh, .. had ... everybody was able to help everybody else and we did have a lot of fun and all we did work.

J.J.: Tell us a little bit about drying cherries?

B.J.: Drying cherries. Well, we had to climb the trees, of course, most of them was too tall to pick off of the ground and we had to climb to them. And, then we had to seed them , by hand. We didn't have a machine to seed cherries with, had to do all that by hand. And, my brothers skim the bark off of a tree, a young tree, take a slats along the end of it to make ^{DRYERS} stives, that's what we spread our cherries on, put them out to dry. Drying apples we did the same way. Had to ... sometime you'd had a roof that we could spread the cherries out on, and taken them out in the apples ... usually the sun, .. if the weather was hot and the sun bright. Why, it wouldn't take more than about two days to dry apples. ... But, we didn't get much for those when we sold them either.

J.J.: Thank you, Aunt ^{BETSEY} Bessie. Aunt Mamie, you started off with your life at about twenty years old and I know as a younger girl you ran over these hollows and yelled, and heard you tell us something about your dancing parties. Uh, ... tell us a little more about it now.

M.J.: Well, when I was young, we use to ... always working around the place. There were three girls that was older. The oldest ones, before we had any boys. The boys was too young to do much work, so ^{WE} us girls had to help our Daddy out in the field when he planting corn, plowing corn, we dropped the corn, and hoed it. We hoes the corn everyday, it was. And, he just carry ... go to the mountain

and carry tan bark our and load it up for him. We helped him with everything. And, ... and then when it come Christmas time, Why, he always hooke up his wagon, fill it full of hay and take us, ... we always had some neighbors, and ~~they~~ had three girls that was our age, and he would take us around everynight to some parties or dances and different things. He was always a great dancer, himself. And, we would always, when he every had a dance, he'd come in and say, "Ladies, you want to go to a dance tonight?" And, we would get ready and go. Our Mother never wanted us to go very much, out at night, but he did. And, he was a great dancer. The first time I ever danced, I danced with my Daddy, and he said, "Come on here now, you'll never learn any younger." So, he would take us to dances and when we ... Christmas, when New Years DAY came he said, "Well, now we'll have to go to work." So, then after that when we ever heard of a dance he'd want to go. And, one night they had a dance over in the next ... other holler, Mr. Jim , and he wanted to go, and he asked me if I wanted to go and I didn't tell him right off that I'd go, and he said, "Well, if you don't go, I'll go down to the school house and get ^{VIRGIE} Versie, she'll go." So, I finally went with him, and we rode horseback over there and he ... And, we danced from dark to daylight. We went by Mr. John Bolen's, he run a Still house, and his son was going with me at the time, of course, they took a little liquor along with them, and they got a little ^{ROWDY} rauty (laughed) there. ... All night long, from dark to daylight. Come back the next day and I couldn't go to school because I was too sleepy. So, then later on he come in and asked me if

I wanted to go to the Ball, and I said, ... I told him yes, and I went in to get ready, and he didn't get ready. He went in the room and layed down on the couch and ... I went in there and we got nearly ready and I said, "Polly, aren't you going?" He said, "No, the boys are old enough now to go," he said, "with you and take care of your horses." He said, "I'll kind of cut it out." So, he didn't go to dances anymore after that, but he always planned a way for us to go, and that the boys go with us to take care of our horses, and we went just the same. He always ... did see to it that we went and had a good time.

J.J.: I know that y'all didn't ^{import} afford an orchestra as we know it today, for dances, can you tell me a little bit about the music that you had at these dances?

M.J.: We had some of the best fiddles that there were around. Newton Frazier, was a good fiddler, and he would, sometime we would have Allie Orken, he was a good fiddler, but he wasn't ^A very ^{CONSTANT ONE}, and he would get tired and he would play a little while, then he would stop. But, Newt never stopped. We just would have to stop the dances for awhile and give him time to rest his fingers, but he ... But, whenever we wanted a fiddler we called on Newt, ... he just played. If we wanted to dance ~~all~~ night long, he'd play all night long.

J.J.: I know dances then was a lot of fun. Aunt ^{BETSEY} Bessie, could you tell us now a little bit about quilt making?

B.J.: Well, uh, .. of course, in them days we always made quilts or we'd piece the quilts and put them together. Get them ready to put in the frames and then we'd call in our

neighbors or friends that ... and ... fixed a big dinner, and they would ... uh, ... sometimes maybe almost quilt a quilt in a whole day. ... By helping one another ... like that ... we got the job done. And a ...

J.J.: This has been a good session today, especially for me. And, I don't believe I have identified myself yet, my full name is, James R. Johnson, I mentioned earlier I am the son of Lawrence E. Johnson. And, of course, I know from the conversation here that you know I have been talking to my two aunts, ... Aunt Mamie and Aunt ^{BETSEY} ~~Bessie~~. And, I would like to Thank both of you for doing this tape with me. I also have my son here today. Young fellow, how old are you?

Son: Five.

J.J.: Aren't you six?

Son: I ain't six.

J.J.: What is your name?

Son: Jim.

J.J.: What is your full name?

Son: Jim Hockman Johnson.

J.J.: Have you been listening to this tape?

Son: Yes.

J.J.: Do you like it?

Son: Yes.

J.J.: Well, that's fine.